

“The Grace of the World”

Thanksgiving 2007
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Everyone, even you, comes from many families. When we gather around the table at Thanksgiving we are surrounded not only by our friends and our relatives but also by our ancestors. Our church is a family of families. When we gather to sing and pray and give thanks for all of the blessings of our lives we are surrounded not only by this present congregation but also by a great cloud of witnesses. We're never alone here our spiritual ancestors are always here with us.

We come from two families of faith. On one side we are descended from the Pilgrims. As Janne told us earlier in the service the Pilgrims

were very serious about their religion. They followed a verse of the Bible taken from a letter written by a man named Paul to a little church just getting organized in a city in Greece called, Corinth. Paul thought people should only spend time with other people who believed the same things they believed. He quoted the Jewish prophets saying, “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, and touch nothing unclean.” So the Pilgrims left England and Holland behind to become “separatists.”

Almost two hundred years later some of the spiritual descendants of that Pilgrim family decided that being separate was not the way to learn to love “their neighbors as themselves.” They were curious

about all the neighbors they had never known. They found lots of ways to love their neighbors. They worked hard to make life better not just for people who believed what they believed, but for everybody. They are here with us today.

At almost the same time the Pilgrims sailed out of Plymouth on the Southeast coast of England our other ancestors were establishing their churches in a place called Transylvania. They called themselves not “separatists” but Unitarians. The place they lived at the time they lived there had more different kinds of people than almost anywhere else in that part of the world. It was in Transylvania that the

Christian west first met the Muslim east. For 150 years they lived together in prosperity and peace.

Our ancestors, who lived during that time, realized, in the words of their first great leader, Francis David, “you need not think alike to love alike.” They thought it was a good idea for people who believed different things about God and the world to talk with and respect each other. They thought God wanted it that way. They also took the Bible as their guide. A man named Matthew, who was trying to write down what he thought Jesus said, wrote their favorite verse.

He wrote that Jesus said, “Look, I send you out as sheep among the wolves. Be you therefore wise as serpents and gentle as doves.”

Both the Pilgrims and the early Unitarians were people who loved to read. They lived in the century when for the first time a lot of people learned how to read. And the book they read most was the Bible.

The Pilgrims thought the Bible taught that they should turn away from the world. The early Transylvanian Unitarians thought the Bible taught them to turn toward the world always trying to be wise and gentle.

Just as we inherit the gifts and the traits of our ancestors, things like a strong heart, or brown eyes or even red hair, our church has inherited both the gifts and the challenges of our spiritual ancestors. We share

their love of reading. We still read the Bible though a million books and poems help to teach us how to live our lives. From the Pilgrims we've learned that sometimes we need to turn away. We need to be with others who believe as we do. We need time for being by ourselves and for sitting together in the quiet. From our Transylvanian ancestors we've learned how important it is to turn toward the world. While the Pilgrims believed that we are born in sin and that this life is just a sad temptation on the way to heaven or to hell, the Unitarians believed God loves us from the start and that we're here to love and bless the world.

We've always known we came from Pilgrim stock. But just as families lose touch with this or that part of their heritage, until recently we didn't really know our Transylvanian relatives.

Now that many of us have made the pilgrimage to Homorodszpeter, now that we've welcomed a few guests from that far away village here to our shores, we're beginning to recognize the strength and beauty we've inherited from them. They helped us learn to love and to care for the land. Those of us who have been pilgrims in the Unitarian homelands have been deeply moved by our cousin's wise and gentle village ways. The Plymouth pilgrims taught us the courage to leave our safe harbors and risk the open sea in search of liberty. Our

freedom owes allegiance to the better lessons that the Pilgrims taught.

So this year when we gather with our families whether bound by blood or chosen out of love let us pause to give thanks not only for the ones around the table but also and especially for the ones gone on before. When we sing our thanksgiving songs they sing along in harmony. When we say our thanksgiving prayers they murmur their assent. When we give thanks for all the blessings of our lives, they cheer us on and bless us still.

May it be so and amen.

